Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 15: Star Trek: Discovery

Guests: Day Al-Mohamed and Andrew Pulrang

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript: Alice Wong

For more information: https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast-2/

Introduction

[hip hop]

LATEEF: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, ALICE.

ALICE: Happy New Year, ya'll! I'm ALICE, and this is the Disability Visibility podcast, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm a longtime fan of Star Trek and today's episode is a discussion of the latest television series, Star Trek: Discovery. This show is available online on CBS All Access with new episodes returning on January 7th. My guests are Day Al-Mohamed and Andrew Pulrang, two disabled Star Trek nerds who have a lot to say on disability representation in Star Trek. If you're not into science fiction, I hope you'll give this a listen and consider exploring the Star Trek universe. Spoiler alert: we will discuss characters and plot points from the first nine episodes of Star Trek: Discovery. One other thing, there's a little bit of background noise throughout the episode so please bear with me. Are you ready? All hands on deck. Away we go!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1!

On Star Trek Discovery and Other Star Trek TV Series

ALICE: Andrew and Day, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast. Why don't you both introduce yourselves? Day, do you want to go first?

DAY: Sure. Hi, this is Day Al-Mohamed. I'm an author and a disability policy specialist and occasional host for Idobi Radio's Geek Girl Riot and a great, big, honking Star Trek fan.

ALICE: How about you, Andrew?

ANDREW: My name's Andrew Pulrang, and I'm a disability blogger and Internet resident and also an enormous, pretty much lifelong Star Trek fan myself.

ALICE: Before we start talking about Star Trek: Discovery, I just want to ask you both really quick, it's a hard question, but out of all the TV series within the Star Trek universe, which one is your favorite and why?

ANDREW: I'll start, and I'll say I think the original series ... I'm going to cheat. I'm going to say the original series for sentimental reasons but Deep Space Nine for total, all around quality.

ALICE: Mmm-hmmm. How about you, Day?

DAY: Picking your favorite Star Trek is kind of like picking your favorite child. No one wants to admit it, but I have to. I'm going to go ahead and do that, do the terrible thing, which is ... I have to admit, I am still mostly attached to the one I saw as a child, which is Star Trek: The Next Generation and when you go back and watch it, some of those episodes are real clunkers, and others are a lot of fun and I'm still convinced that I just need to grow up a little more, and then I can marry Captain Jean Luc Picard.

ALICE: What are your overall thoughts about Star Trek: Discovery so far??

DAY: This is Day. For me, I have to admit, it's a little tough to say, insofar as ... How about this? I was thinking about the first season of Next Generation, not necessarily its strongest point. Took a little bit to get their feet under them, and then you saw it grow from there. For a lot of TV series, in some ways, at least traditionally, you take that first season getting to know some core characters, and then in season two, you get to expand to learn more about interactions across the world, and you get to see the world they live in expanded, so I like Discovery. I'm actually looking more forward to season two, because I'm interested in the characters they have, but I miss that large, broad swath of world, which I guess we've come to expect with Star Trek. The thing is it takes time to develop that. Right now, they're still developing our initial characters and drive the world that we live in.

ALICE: How about you, Andrew? What are your thoughts about Star Trek: Discovery so far?

ANDREW: I think, somewhat like the way Day has said, that it's a bit early to say for sure. I do agree that, much like I remember The Next Generation starting out, you can see all their work in Discovery. You can see all the notes in the margins, kind of…. Everything is really heavily underscored, just in case you don't get what you're trying to do, and that detracts a little bit, but again, that's the way Next Generation was when it first started... because they do have story arcs and mysteries involved, ongoing mysteries, I think they'll be able to overcome that, those sort of clunker aspects, and really get onto some good stuff.

ALICE: I do think it's interesting that the main character is not the captain with this series. What are your thoughts about that, Day and Andrew?

DAY: I think it's fascinating. I guess a small part of me ... Let me just say, I'm one of those people who, I'll be honest, is battling a little bit with what my expectations were in some ways. I saw the trailers, and I'm like, "Michelle Yeoh and Sonequa Martin-Green," I'm like, "Yes! That is the duo I want to see running a ship!" A small part of me is like, "Hey, bait and switch there." Yes, we still see Martin-Green in there. I really love her as Michael Burnham. We now have a main character that we follow who has more freedom to do multiple things, because in the role of captain, at least the way they're showing it here, there are a few more restrictions on what a captain does versus what the crew actually does. So there is some interesting point on that front, but I guess I'm real big on ... I'd love to see a woman run a ship again.

ANDREW: You know, one classic lineup of the old series was, Captain Kirk was the brave, honorable, duty-bound person, Spock was the very logical person, and Bones was the emotional guy. I feel like you're beginning to get a little of that, that Lorca is ... I don't know if he's all about duty, but he's definitely about the mission. Burnham is dealing with having a logical approach at everything, which sometimes doesn't work so well for her. Then Saru's really the weak point in that. I'm not sure what they're doing with him. Again, maybe they're still playing around with the combinations, trying to figure out what chemistry works best.

ALICE: I do think it's refreshing that Saru is pretty much the Number One and he shows fear, you know? I think that's really unusual, that he's so open about it. I think that's what's nice. Here are these people on the bridge. They're going through huge unknowns with the Klingon Empire, and Saru shows fear, and he's open about it. I don't know if that's something that's intentional with the show or not.

DAY: One of the things that caught my attention that this Star Trek is doing that's not been really done before is that we are actually also getting a clear POV from the other side. There are scenes that take place that are just the Klingons, where we are following what happens to them, and we're following individuals within that culture. We can't forget, the one Klingon whose skin color was different from all the others. Oh, goodness. I had a hard time because I didn't get my audio description on. There was one who ended up being scarred on her face, so in some ways, there's a little bit of that on that side, but that has not been done really any of the other Star Treks in any meaningful way. The other side is, it seems odd to use the word, but is humanized.

[instrumental music--trilling synthesizer sounds, as if a transporter was beaming someone up]

Disability Representation in Star Trek: Discovery

ALICE: What were your kind of like, hopes or expectations about disability representation in Star Trek: Discovery before you started watching, and as you started watching it, what's been your assessment so far?

DAY: Mmmmm. So, this is Day. I think we gained a lot from The Next Generation by having Geordi La Forge be a member of the bridge crew. Having that as a character made a difference as something somebody could see, and you see themselves existing in the future versus being completely eliminated, because disabilities aren't going to exist. People with disabilities, they're going to be wiped out. I'm using harsh language ... I'm using on purpose.

When it comes to Discovery, we do see disability there in some ways. It is a little more subtle. Some of that I like, and some of that I don't. Captain Lorca we know has issues with light because of damage to his eyes. It comes up a little bit here and there, but it's okay. How about that? I'm like, "I want more!" We certainly see the trauma with both Tyler and Burnham, and then there was a lot of online chatter about Tilly, who is currently my favorite character, and questions that she might be on the spectrum. I know there was an article about it. There was a discussion on Twitter, actually, with the actress, whose response was, no, she hadn't thought about it that way, but she's super excited that other people do, if they're autistic, see themselves in her and in her character and that she was just thrilled with that. I'm like, "Okay." I'm great with that, whether it is or not, but I think she's just a fun character either way.

Yeah, I can't remember, but there's a party scene, and I remember Tyler toasts those who sacrificed with it and specifically highlighted a character with a disability. No name, nothing, they're just sitting there, but hey, it's there, so I'm a little disappointed, but I'd also have to admit I probably had some unrealistic expectations, and the fact of what they do have in there I thought wasn't necessarily done poorly.

ALICE: Thank you, Day. How about you, Andrew?

ANDREW: I think the disabilities that they're showing, either intentionally or not, mostly tend to come on the non-visible disability side of things, if there is a side. I hate to draw these distinctions, but my instinct and feeling as a person with physical disabilities is they've got people with all kinds of different mental disabilities, PTSD, possibly autism, anxiety, all of these

things, and that's very positive. I guess I've started to think that, like a lot of Star Trek, it's reflecting what is the most talked about and groundbreaking things of the day. So, and I think those kinds of disabilities, which have traditionally not even been considered disabilities in the traditional sense, are sort of the groundbreaking, most talked about, most discussed, most in need of exposure, and so that's what they're doing.

Again, I have no idea whether it's intentional...There's this element of, "Something's up here. I'm not sure what it is," and I think that's good for the show, because it leaves lots of possibilities open, even if they don't follow all of them.

ALICE: Yeah, it is more of a nuanced way to represent disability as in there's all types, and some are more apparent than not, and some are just...some may never have to be identified by name, and I think that's also good, too, because in a way, it makes it part of the organic, part of who the character is.

I also want to bring up another character that, especially at the end of episode nine, I do think that Stamets, at the very end, when you see him changing during the last jump, it looks like, I think what I saw was his eyes changed color. Did you guys catch that? Because I wonder if both of you would consider Stamets as possibly having a disability.

DAY: Oh, you just swiped what was going to be one of my next thoughts, which was ... Stamets is basically a human with ... He's been augmented by having tardigrade DNA grafted to his own DNA, and he's got obviously the advantages of that that come to the Discovery, allowing them to use this kind of spore jump, but there's clearly some negatives. It impacts how he behaves, how he thinks, and several things like that with relationships. Here's my thing: is this a future disability?

ALICE: It's definitely a cyborg-like existence, where he is becoming more than human, or something else plus human. That to me is very interesting, too, that that's a whole new way of existing, which is something that's ... whether that causes a disability or not, what we think about disability, it might be.

DAY: Right. That was kind of where I was thinking about it. How do we define disability? In that time period, which is what, 22, 2250-something, right? Maybe the idea of disability ... Since he's the first one, obviously it may not be there yet, but if it's something that's going to impact who you are, how is that different than, in our time period, a traumatic brain injury that might change the way a person behaves or thinks or relates to others? Obviously, it's doing that to him.

ALICE: Yeah. I was thinking about brain injury as well with Stamets, or at least a neurodivergence, in terms of the way his brain is definitely being rewired as a result of the spores.

DAY: While you guys were talking, I did want to look up ... At the party scene, when Tyler gives his toast to those who've sacrificed, he specifically pinpoints a character that supposedly had a disability. He was saluting who sacrificed and are still with us and those who sacrificed and who are gone. I had to Google, so his name is George Alevizos, who's a theatre and drama studies student at University of Toronto and Sheridan College. He's an actor, part of engineering at Star Trek: Discovery, and he is a wheelchair user.

ALICE: Yea!!

DAY: It was one shot and one scene, but I was like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, what?" and had to do a little hunting, so maybe-

ANDREW: Maybe they'll bring him back.

DAY: Yeah, maybe we'll see more of him.

ANDREW: Love that.

[instrumental music--screechy creepy sci-fi music]

Science Fiction, Star Trek, and Politics

ALICE: Clearly, all three of us are sci-fi nerds and proud of it, but what's unique about this genre that helps us to boost our imaginations and our understandings of disability or quote-unquote "the other?" What is unique about sci-fi that you appreciate?

ANDREW: Every era has its own Star Trek, and I think that's what people a lot of times say about sci-fi, is that it takes place in the future, but what it's really doing is telling you about how people in the present are thinking about things. I think, if that follows, then each different generation of Star Trek is going to reflect a particular era's view about disability, what people are talking about with disability.

The Next Generation, some of the episodes they had were all about, on the one hand, very much normalizing disability and saying, "It's no big deal. There's nothing to it. It's just a thing. No sweat," or then you had episodes like the really bad episode on disabilities like being paralyzed and whether, "Oh my gosh, do you even want to live anymore?" which kind of reflects that 90's sort of view of disability in that way. Whether they know it or not, Discovery's kind of updating that a little bit and saying ... Those type of issues aren't really even coming up in particular, which I think is great.

Oh, the one character that I want to mention that I think about as being a very not talked about but very present example, I don't even know her name, but she's one of the people at the helm who was on the original ship, on Georgiou's ship….

DAY: Yeah, Kara [actually Keyla Detmer], right?

ANDREW: Okay. Yeah, I don't know her name, but she was badly injured, obviously, and next time we saw her, she had this prosthetic face thing and has had it ever since. Nobody talks about it. They're not showing any issues with her. She's just there. That's a story that you can tell later on, any time. If they have a thing, they want to say, "Let's explore something new," they can go back to her and say, "What is the deal with her?" I think that's great, too, planting these little seeds. We don't have to hear about it as soon as it happens. You can say it here.

ALICE: How about you, Day?

DAY: Science fiction has always been about the idea of possibility and what-if. Sometimes it's near future, sometimes it's far future, but it lets us explore not just technology, although it tends to highlight some of the technologies, but it lets us also think about society and culture and how those kinds of things change. In many ways, a lot of times science fiction, you see those two tracks. One is the future dystopia, which there have been quite a few of late, particularly in film, and then the other side, which in many ways, what Star Trek has always embodied, was the hopeful side of what the future would look like. Yes, there are still problems and things like that,

but we are actually working them out. We are seeking opportunities in a better future. I've always been attracted in many ways to the ideas of the what-ifs, and in particular to Star Trek because of the idea of that positive kind of culture thing. Star Trek has always, in many ways, been about hope, and that's the thing I love the most about it.

ALICE: Yeah, I love that, too.

DAY: The other small thing about science fiction in general, whether it's dystopic or it's more on that hopeful side, science fiction has always, always been a political animal. I know when Discovery first came out, there were a lot of people who were like, "Ah, get your politics out of my science fiction." Star Trek has always been political. It has had more controversial and more ground-breaking kinds of things that have happened as a part of the show. It has criticized the way we look at race and sexuality and misogyny and the way we look at ageism and the way we even look at disability and war and how we treat each other, commerce, economics. It has made us think about those things because it offers an opportunity to criticize them by taking it out of our world and putting it into a different kind of a world. It's easier to see it from outside than it is to see it from yourself. I think that's one of the biggest advantages of reading science fiction, is because it offers that.

ANDREW: Absolutely. One thing I cannot ... I understand it, but I sort of don't understand it, is the Star Trek fans who will be the first to say, "Don't put politics in it." I'm thinking, "We're not even watching the same show, apparently." How can you, you know? It's all about that. I mean, it's not all about that. It's inherent. There are other sci-fi TV shows and movies that legitimately have far less politics, and if politics issues like that really bother you, you could go and watch those, but Star Trek is special in dealing with those issues.

ALICE: Yeah. And I guess the final question to you both is, what else would you like to see in terms of disability representation in Star Trek Discovery? Of course, we're only nine episodes in. This was the mid- season finale. Star Trek will return in January, but what is your ... Looking forward, in terms of completion of of this season and hopefully season two?

DAY: This is Day. I have to admit, looking towards the rest of the season and then season two, we have our core characters in many ways. They've given us who they are, and we've seen where those little bits of disability are. I think, like Andrew said, we end up having to almost seek it out and find what might be there almost by accident, which makes me a little bit sad, because one of the things that was a wonderful moment, actually, in these first few episodes was the kiss between Culber and Stamets. I'm like, "Gay couple, right there, on screen." Wonderful kiss there in the moment. There's a great scene of the two of them brushing their teeth beside each other, and if you think about it, there has not been any openly gay Star Trek characters before this. That actually is a big moment. I'm like, "Great, that's awesome," and we have it there in that moment.

Now, as they build out more of those other outside characters, as the world expands, like I said, that's what usually happens in season two, I really would like to see at least one of those outside characters have a disability, be comfortable with that disability. That way, we've got somebody who comes in and out as needed, whether they're in the background or whatever, that has a clear disability. If they come up for an episode or two as needed for things, great, but that's one of the things I'd like to see.

ANDREW: In answer to your other question, Alice, I think what I'd like to see is ... On the one hand, I'd like to see characters perhaps like Tilly starting at a place where they don't recognize themselves as having a "disability," in quotation marks, but kind of coming to grips with that or

confronting that in a more direct way for themselves, whether it's Tyler really confronting and dealing with having PTSD, what all of that might mean, and for Tilly, pulling together all of the quirks that she has maybe into something that is more than just some personality traits that she has to actually deal with. That would be interesting to watch, because that's what happens to a lot of actual people in our present day world. You don't necessarily come into the world saying, "I'm disabled." They come in with a lot of big stuff that they don't know quite what to do with.

ALICE: Yeah. It's great that there's a whole range of disabled characters in Discovery that we know of so far. I'd like to see more disabled actors join the cast. Yes, it was great that there was a character at the party scene who's actually disabled, the actor who's a wheelchair user, but let's hope that they bring in actually disabled actors, which as we know is all part of more authentic representation, not just in storylines or the characters, but the performers themselves. Day, Andrew, thank you so much for talking with me today. I really enjoyed this conversation. Live long and prosper!!

ANDREW: Absolutely.

DAY: Thanks for having me.

Wrap-up

[hip-hop]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes including text transcripts are available at disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/.

You can find more info about Andrew and Day on our website. The audio producer for this episode is me, Alice Wong. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp. If you want to start off the new year right, subscribe to the Disability Visibility podcast on iTunes, Stitcher or Google Play. And if you're able, you can also contribute a few bucks per month at our patreon page at Patreon.com/DVP. That's p-a-t-r-e-o-n dot com, slash DVP. Every little bit goes to creating disabled media like this podcast. Thanks for listening and see YOU on the Internets! Byeeeee!

[hip-hop]